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March 16, 2014: The New Cosmos Series Plays Out the Old Culture Wars

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Title: The New Cosmos Series Plays Out the Old Culture Wars

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3/16/2014—Tonight is the second episode of the new Cosmos series. I loved the old series, by Carl Sagan, because of its simplicity and sense of adventure. The new series is pompous and overblown—like movies, the special effects are so prevalent, they are not special. I learned a few things—like about rogue planets—but the sense of light fun along with serious engagement was missing. Nothing illustrated the grim agenda of the series better than the emphasis on the treatment by the Catholic Church of Giordano Bruno. This story was the longest single segment in the first episode. Bruno was tried for heresy and was burned at the stake in 1600. While the story is completely true, what exactly was it doing in the series? Although Bruno engaged in cosmological speculations—he proposed that the sun was just another star, for example—my understanding (from Wikipedia, but I have heard this before) is “that Bruno's ideas about the universe played a small role in his trial.” That is easy to believe since Bruno denied the divinity of Christ, the virginity of Mary and the doctrine of Transubstantiation—all matters that might get you burned at the stake in 1600 quite apart from any beliefs about the sun. Presenting the evil looking Cardinals suppressing free thought in Bruno's case is not about the history of science. It is a reflexive anti-religion theme that plays a role in current attitudes about religious institutions and teaches little if anything about scientific speculation. There is no question that the Catholic Church did suppress some scientific thought—see Galileo—but it is also the case that a number of the early scientists were themselves clerics—see Copernicus—or pious believers—see Newton. It is also true that the scientific endeavor that we know today arose only in Christendom and may actually owe something to Christianity—the belief that the Creator is benign and orderly and that the Creation may teach something about God's nature—the new learning was originally understood as a branch of “natural theology” after all. Tonight's episode apparently treats of evolutionary theory. I am prepared for more anti-religious propaganda. We shall see.